

## Thriving on Barren Ground<sup>1</sup>

At first blush, Mark's version of Jesus' temptation story seems like a disappointment. Luke and Matthew give us much longer, more interesting stories of Jesus fasting and resisting the Devil. Mark skips all that. Instead, Mark inserts two details, namely that Jesus was with the wild beasts and that angels ministered to him. Those details take our minds back to the Garden of Eden when the biblical first humans, Adam and Eve, lived in harmony with the animals and had plenty to eat. Elsewhere, the Bible refers to animals and humans living in peace together in that day when God will have established his reign of love over creation:

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb...and a little child shall lead them. The suckling child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adders den.

So...Wow! Suddenly the desert where we find Jesus is not altogether desolate or distressing. Suddenly desert merges with paradise! Suddenly we're back in the Garden of Eden before the man and woman sinned.

This merger of wilderness with paradise doesn't only come to the surface in these verses. The greatest of all wilderness times was the one where the freed Hebrew slaves wandered in the Sinai wilderness for forty years. Significantly, that period

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<sup>1</sup>Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on March 1, 2008 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, GA.

wasn't an entirely distressing time. The people had adequate food. They were protected from enemies. They received the Law at Mt. Sinai, which was the world's first national constitution. And all of this was mixed in with a lot of complaining and fearfulness.

The desert, on balance, was such a good time for the relationship between God and his people that several centuries after settlement of Canaan, the Prophet Hosea depicted God as longing for the good old days when it was just God and his beloved people together in the desert. Says God through the prophet, Hosea:

Behold I will allure her (Israel) and bring her back into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her...And there she will answer as in the days of her youth, as at a time when she came out of the land of Egypt.

Sounds like a sexy first date when lovers are alone together for the first time!

Maybe that's why in the early days of the Christian Church, the most ardent Christians, people like Anthony, left civilization and congregation and set up hermitages in the desolate territory in Egypt. There's something about the desert that is spiritually rich. And I'm thinking that this insight can make a difference for your and my lives.

I visited a lady, several years ago, who quite unexpectedly found herself confined to a wheelchair due to a bad surgical outcome. For months, she expected to be getting up and walking and getting back to her life. But her medical news continued to be disappointing. One day as I spoke to her I found myself asking, "Do you suppose you might be in the wilderness?" She was fascinated with the idea and started reading everything she could find about the Exodus story and the idea of wilderness. The idea of being in the wilderness was a whole new way to look at her situation.

You see, what makes the wilderness so encouraging is that it isn't only bad. The spiritual wilderness is like a desert ecosystem which is, yes, arid and desolate, but also beautiful and teeming with life.

Let me list some of the characteristics of the wilderness as it is given to us by our faith.

- 1.) The wilderness is uncomfortably meager. Wilderness time is a hungry, stressed out, precarious existence.
- 2.) And, the wilderness is a time when we get just enough to make it to the next day. I'm thinking of all those years the Hebrews survived day by day on the manna bread, which God provided. Interesting that God

chooses not to give more to give more to his people.

He does give just enough.

- 3.) The wilderness experience stretches on for a long time. The number 40 is a Biblical symbol for a long time. The chief reason God consigned his people to stay in the desert so long was to give all the old-timers a chance to die off. Wilderness transforms us by being a lengthy-seemingly unending-experience. And it does end. The point of the wilderness is to prepare us for something abundant that God wants to give us. Wilderness wouldn't be as rich and positive if it simply went on forever.
- 4.) And it does end. The point of the wilderness is to prepare us for something abundant that God wants to give us. Wilderness wouldn't be as rich and positive if it simply went on forever.
- 5.) Wilderness is a place of temptation. Jesus' sojourn in the desert provided Satan an opportunity to put Jesus under pressure. In our wilderness times there'll be a struggle to choose the right path. The wilderness is always a high stakes spiritual time.
- 6.) Not only are demons more prevalent in the wilderness, so is God. You notice that angel's minister to Jesus

in our text this morning. In the Exodus, God was present with the Hebrews in the form of a cloud, a fiery pillar, and through Moses. The wilderness is just a spiritually intense time.

Well, what do we do with all of this? How does this wilderness touch your life and my life?

It might be that someone here is in his or her own wilderness and doesn't know it. We tend to miss the richness of our wildernesses because we tend in our time to see any suffering as purely negative. We see misery as a mistake or an indication that God is mad or absent. If you struggle, consider the possibility that you're in the wilderness. Maybe finances are very bad for you right now. That wouldn't be a surprise in our current atmosphere. Maybe you are struggling with a family member. Maybe you're in trouble. Sick. Just unhappy. Maybe you're trapped and see no way out. If any of these are true for you, consider the possibility that you are in the wilderness. That means that, in addition to being uncomfortable you are also being quietly and modestly sustained. Each day you are getting enough to carry on. You've probably been wandering for a long time. Know this; you will come out of your wilderness. Let that thought sustain you. Above all enjoy the fact that God is using your wilderness to shape you deeply. Maybe something

needs to die in you before you are ready to move into your Promised rest.

For all of us, we can create a little wilderness each day by withdrawing to prayer. It's no accident that Jesus retreated to a quiet place to be alone with God. A daily quiet time might well be our own daily wilderness, with all its riches and hazards.

Lent is wilderness time. And it's a good time to look at our lives with new eyes and to venture more intentionally into the desert.

So, at the heart of the Bible's message is a summons to move out of any easy spirituality of personal well being, comfort, and happiness to re-discover the beautiful severity of the wilderness way. It was Israel's way. It was Jesus' way. And it is our way. For only through the desert lies our Promised Land and holy Sabbath.